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from *The Book of the Dead Man* · Marvin Bell

(#6)

1. ABOUT THE DEAD MAN'S SPEECH

Will the dead man speak? Speak, says the lion and the dead man makes the sound of a paw in the dirt.

When the dead man paws the dirt, lions feel the trembling of the pride.

Speak, says the tree, and the dead man makes the sound of tree bark enlarging its circumference, a slight inhalation.

Speak, says the wind, and the dead man exhales all at once.

Whoever told the dead man to be quiet was whistling in the dark.

To the dead man the dark is all words as white is all colors.

The dead man obliges, he cooperates, he speaks when spoken to, so when the dirt says Speak, he says what erosion says.

And when the air says Speak, the dead man says what a cavity says.

The dead man knows the syntax of rivers and rocks, the one a long ever-qualifying sentence for which no last words suffice, the other the briefest and most steadfast exercise in exclusion.

The dead man is a rock carried by a river, a pebble borne by air, a sound carved into frequencies infrequently registered.

2. MORE ABOUT THE DEAD MAN'S SPEECH

The dead man is part of the chorus that sings the music of the spheres.

Dead man's music uses the harmonics and parasitics of sound, in bands of low frequencies caught in ground waves that hug the terrain as they go, and in ultra-high megacycles that dent the ionosphere and refract over the horizon.

The dead man makes no distinction between the music he hears and the music he only knows about.

There are five elements in the dead man's music (time, tempo, key, harmony and counterpoint) and two factors (silence and chance).

To the dead man, the wrinkled back of a hand is a score to be read.

The balding top and back of his head are a kind of braille awaiting a blind conductor.

The dead man's bone-sounds and teeth-clacks are a form of tuning-up.

Sad music brings artificial tears to the dead man's dilated eyes.

All things being equal, the dead man is not fussy about pitch and dissonance.

His inner ear is set to hear euphonic consonants.

The dead man sings in the shower, in good weather and bad, without knowing a song.

He hums the tunes of commercials without the words, sympathetic vibrations.

He has ideas for musical instruments made of roots and feathers, harps that use loose dirt something like an interrupted hourglass.

When the dead man, in a gravelly voice, sings gospel, hammers descend upon anvils.

(#13)

1. ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND THUNDER

When the dead man hears thunder, he thinks someone is speaking.

Hearing the thunder, the dead man thinks he is being addressed.

He thinks he is being addressed because the sound contains heat and humidity—or groaning and salivation.

Isn't that always the way with passionate language—heat and humidity?

The dead man passes burning bushes and parting seas without inner trembling, nor does he smear his door with blood.

The dead man can only be rattled physically, never emotionally.

The dead man's neuroses cancel each other out like a floor of snakes.

He is the Zen of open doors, he exists in the zone of the selfless, he has visions and an ear for unusual music.

Now he can hear the swirling of blood beneath his heartbeat.

Now he can fall in love with leaves—with the looping lift and fall of love.

Naturally, the dead man is receptive, has his antennas out, perches on the edge of sensitivity to receive the most wanton prayer and the least orderly of wishes.

To the dead man, scared prayer isn't worth a damn.

The dead man erases the word for God to better understand divinity.
When nothing interferes, nothing interrupts, nothing sustains or concludes,
then there's no need to separate doing from not-doing or to distribute
the frequencies of the thunder into cause and effect.
The dead man speaks God's language.

2. MORE ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND THUNDER

The dead man counts the seconds between lightning and thunder to see how
far he is from God.
The dead man counts God among his confidants: they whisper.
The dead man hears the screams of roots being nibbled by rodents.
He notes the yelps of pebbles forced to maneuver and of boulders pinned
into submission.
He feels the frustration of bodily organs forced to be quiet.
He thinks it's no wonder the sky cries and growls when it can.
The dead man's words can be just consonants, they can be only vowels,
they can pile up behind his teeth like sagebrush on a fence or float like
paper ashes to the top of fathomless corridors, they can echo like wind
inside a skull or flee captivity like balloons that have met a nail.
The dead man serves an indeterminate sentence in an elastic cell.
He hears a voice in the thunder and sees a face in the lightning, and there's
a smell of solder at the junction of earth and sky.

(#26)

1. ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND HIS CORTEGE

Dead man says "cortege" because, who knows?, means to be watched from
a distance.
In dreams lost, the dead man unquestionably meant something.
Just as well the dead man's language not in the dictionary, good outcome.
When there is no more approval, no okay, nothing sufficient or
appropriate, then it's just as well the dead man's words can't
be looked up.
The dead man inclines toward an erasable slate.

The dead man knows what Hobbes said and goes along from Hobbes' perspective: "nasty, brutish and short."
 The dead man holds to the horizon, the cause of perspective.
 The dead man, not able to hold a pen to render, thus not having to decide this side or that, doesn't see things Hobbes' way unless he tries to.
 The dead man thinks Hobbes was one of those grass-is-always-greener fellows who went into the jungle.
 The dead man is a preservationist, a nutrition conservative, an inactive environmentalist rotting within the system.
 The dead man's cortege follows him for philosophical reasons, the students of supernal gravity.
 The dead man makes no tracts, leaves no artifacts not in fragments.
 The dead man's skin no good for book binding, too wrinkled.
 The dead man's eyes no good for marbles, out-of-round.
 The dead man's ears no sound-system, scattered parts for a horseshoeing.
 The dead man's bones skewer the architecture.
 The dead man's veins and arteries no good for plumbing, stripped threads and leaky.
 The dead man's bladder won't hold air, so no balloon, no bellows.
 The dead man's nails a poor mica, the dead man's hair bad straw.
 The dead man's vocal chords no harp for a fork, won't hold a tuning.
 The dead man's blood no good for oil, too much iron.
 The dead man's shoulders a faulty yoke, ill-fit to the oxen.

2. MORE ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND HIS CORTEGE

Drying, the dead man rises at dawn like active yeast.
 At sundown, the dead man descends from that chemical pride for which body heat is the catalyst into the rag and wood vat.
 The dead man is the chief ingredient in paper and in marks on paper.
 Muddy blood is the ink in the leaves of grass.
 The dead man's a craftsman of ivy, vines and the broken lattice.
 The dead man testifies to wind, torn bushes and the clatter from the hen house.
 Placing the dead man is difficult, putting him away takes time, he knocks on the walls of a resonant cavity underfoot.

The dead man reappears by first light and last light, in olive light, in queer violet light, in blossoming light, defenseless light, torn light, frozen light, sweating light, and he himself is lit from within.

The dead man has the luminescence of rotting wood.

When there is nowhere to go to find him, no circumstance, no situation, no jewel in the crown, no gem of the ocean, no pearl of the Antilles, no map, no buried treasure, only woods and more woods, then suddenly he will appear to you with a cortege of wolves or foxes in the midst of your blues.

The dead man lives on Socratic dialogue and fungi.

The dead man has plenty of company.